



Thinking out loud

ESSAY 28.11.2018
Leestijd 14 — 17
minuten

Essayistic figures on stage

The influence of the essay as a means of expression has long reached beyond the confines of literature. Just think of the visual essay and the rich history of the essay film. In his groundbreaking study *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999), theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann devoted a very short chapter to the 'scenic essay'. Lehmann saw it as one of the possible paths that theatre could pursue as soon as it decentralized or let go of the dramatic plot. Today, a lot of the work that dominates our stages possesses an essayistic slant. Why is that? And how do artists translate this form to the stage?

Before we set off, a brief aside. For this article we gathered viewing experiences, ideas and other people's theoretical insights in order to put together, as philosopher Bart Verschaffel calls it, a 'figure', a 'constellation of images and words' that forms a 'prefiguration or prediction of a thought'.¹

It strikes us that the theoretical materials that we have used for this purpose are drawn exclusively from white Western men. Besides Hans-Thies Lehmann and Bart Verschaffel, we rely on Georg Lukács, Aldous Huxley, Theodor W. Adorno, Thijs Lijster and René Boomkens. We are not pointing out our own blind spots because we want to be the most politically correct white boys in the class. Rather, it is an invitation to others to embroider further and to make other figures with other elements.

About almost anything

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose *Essais* were inspired by Plutarch's *Moralia* from the first and second century, is considered the progenitor of the essay. Less Eurocentric literary historians will point out, however, that a few centuries earlier already, a comparable sort of text emerged in Japan: the *zuihitsu*, which moreover was often penned by female authors. The most illustrious example is *The Pillow Book* (1002), a loose collection of short observations, anecdotes and reflections by the court lady Sei Shōnagon.

As a multifaceted, generic literary genre, the essay is not easy to define. In libraries and

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¹ Verschaffel, B. (1995). *Figuren* (p.11). Leuven: Van Halewyck. Quote translated by Patrick Lennon.

bookshops, you will find it among non-fiction, although some essays blur the border between fact and fiction. And although essays are for the most part relatively concise texts, some take up an entire book. At the start of the twentieth century, literary historian and philosopher Georg Lukács wrote that the essay form had 'not yet (...) travelled the road to independence, which its sister, poetry, covered long ago – the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art'.²

Today, more than a century later, the essay is still a blend with an unstable status, a genre that is open to all sorts of knowledge forms, methods and stylistic registers, besides the most diverse subjects and problems. Montaigne, for instance, wrote about conscience, friendship, laziness, fleas, cannibals, thumbs, the battle of Dreux, and much more. Aldous Huxley saw the essay as 'a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything',³ a quote that reverberates in the titles of such recent essay collections as Christophe Van Gerrewey's *Over alles en voor iedereen* (2015; On everything and for everyone) and Mark Greif's *Against Everything* (2016).

Huxley even attempted to add some nuance to that 'everything' or 'almost anything'. He distinguished three poles between which, in his view, most essays are to be located: (1) the reflective autobiography and the personal experience, (2) the factual, i.e. specific literary, scientific or political subjects, and (3) abstract-universal themes. Some essays cover one or two of these poles; the most successful ones, Huxley believed, cover the entire field between the poles.

First-person plural

Performances such as Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere's *Mining Stories* (2016) and Jaha Koo's *Cuckoo* (2017) are at the intersection of documentary narrative theatre and the scenic essay. Both are solos with a searching, questioning tone, in which a maker-performer connects a large number of voices and documents from his or her personal perspective – an approach that is reminiscent of the tradition of the documentary essay film. Influential exponents of the essay film such as Werner Herzog, Agnès Varda or Adam Curtis are always explicitly present in their films either by themselves stepping into the frame or by using their off-screen voice to steer the spectators through their associative thought processes and observations.



The pulsating montage of projected news footage with which the lecture-performance *Cuckoo* opens looks as if it has been drawn from a BBC documentary by Curtis. His work (which is available in full on YouTube) is highly acclaimed in artistic circles, not only for his acute cultural-critical analyses but also, and more so still, for his style. The artist-journalist, who can forage like a Benjaminian ragpicker through the bottomless BBC archives, mixes home-made recordings and interviews with old-fashioned TV footage: surprising fragments from forgotten documentaries, commercials and sometimes previously unseen journalistic footage. Curtis manages to keep the documentary jumble afloat with the help of his wide-ranging historicizing narratives, his perceptive commenting voice and a large number of samples from the history of pop music, which generate an ironic clash between critique and entertainment.

Today YouTube has turned a lot of artists into multimedia ragpickers. The video prologue to *Cuckoo* shows a media-archaeological patchwork similar to the films of Curtis: a juxtaposition of different grains, colour tonalities, degrees of sharpness, sound qualities, rhetorical strategies and so forth. The news footage covers a couple of decades of recent South Korean history. Jaha Koo's accompanying voice-over tells the

- 2 Lukács, G. (1911). *Soul and Form* (p. 29). Ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. Trans. Anna Bostock. New York: Columbia UP. (2010)
- 3 Huxley, A. (1958). *Collected Essays* (pp. 5-19). New York: Harper & Row.

story of a 'society under pressure', marked by the deep economic crisis of the late 1990s, neoliberal reforms imposed by the IMF and the US, sharply growing inequality and political unrest. Running beneath this grim overview is a poppy electronic score, whose effect, however, is somewhat less ironic than in the work of BBC outsider Curtis.

“In *Cuckoo*, Jaha Koo tries to map out how the time of his young life is connected with the time of a collective (South Korean) history.”

Could that have something to do with the fact that Koo's quest is a far more personal one, at the crossroads of historiography and autobiography? Perhaps it is less conducive to irony. Although Curtis always adopts a subjective narrative standpoint in his films, they are never about his own life. More so still, unlike Varda or Herzog, he does not use the first-person singular, instead often adopting the first-person plural, with which he directly addresses both himself and his public as members of a large community. (Which one exactly – humanity at the start of the twenty-first century, the West, the 99 per cent, etc. – is something that can sometimes change or remain unnamed.)

Koo, by contrast, tries to map out how the time of his young life – from his birth in 1984 through the years of his youth and his move to Europe until now – is connected with the time of a collective (South Korean) history – a history in relation to which he, as an emigrant, now stands both inside and outside. How did the larger social context influence his own microcosm? He movingly relates how the wave of suicides brought about by South Korea's economic troubles also touched a childhood friend. And even in an apparently banal appliance, the Cuckoo electronic rice cooker, 'I' and 'we' appear to come together. The artist took his cooker with him when he moved to Europe. Since then, it has acted as a bridge between his own everyday life and that of his former fellow compatriots, many of whom have a Cuckoo in their kitchens.

Strong narratives

Koo's performance relates mainly to the first two points of Huxley's triad. By closely interweaving autobiography, history and politics, Koo's scenic essay in one movement manages to avoid the pitfalls of the narcissistic ego-document, the dramatized history lesson and the tiresome political pamphlet.



For its part, *Mining Stories* by Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere moves between all three poles of the essay. The performance explores the causes and the aftermath of a mining disaster in Brazil. That the majority of those concerned are themselves economically dependent on the mining company only makes the case even more complicated. Moreover, the case study is the occasion for a broad range of reflections on collective traumas, the memory and amnesia of a community, the complex relations between ecology and economy, and the social role of religion. As an ambitious weave, it

offers a welcome escape from the ubiquitous passion for themes in the arts and beyond whereby everything must be communicable in rapid, simple terms. That Huysmans, who is alone on stage, grew up in the region is mentioned briefly at the start and subsequently not touched upon. A list of mining disasters elsewhere in the world suggests that other places face comparable issues.

In an intriguing, significant manner, the artist is both present and absent in her own work. During most of the show, she posts herself bang in the middle of the stage, looking directly at each individual spectator. But why does she keep quiet from start to finish? Because her personal story or vision doesn't matter here? Because she can't manage to adopt a standpoint with regard to the complicated question of guilt which the mining disaster raises? Or because she prefers to incite the public to position itself? Using her feet to turn on a number of different sound pedals, she facilitates, like a kind of DJ, the voicing of others, people who were interviewed during the making process but who, thanks to the live montage, we can now hear dialogue with one another, as it were.

These voices are simultaneously surtitled/translated and split up scenographically in two groups: on the wooden panels that hang above the stage, we read the words of a multidisciplinary group of experts, including a professor of literature, a neurologist, an economist, etc. In themselves they have nothing to do with the particular story of the mining disaster. Their insights serve to weave that broader thematic web. The interview fragments of the inhabitants of the ravaged region in Brazil are projected onto the lecterns on stage. *Mining Stories* constantly swings back and forth between a bird's-eye view and a worm's-eye view, between reflective distance and an emotionally charged, practical entanglement. The silent Huysmans finds herself, literally and figuratively, caught in the middle.

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With their multilayered and extensive narrative force, performances such as *Mining Stories* and *Cuckoo* respond to the contemporary longing for narrative coherence and clarity in a complex, impenetrable world. With *De grote vlucht inwaarts* (The great inward escape) art and culture philosopher Thijs Lijster wrote a widely read essay collection on that issue. It is especially the passage about the so-called 'strong narratives' that seemed to touch an important chord for many.

Following philosopher René Boomkens, who first coined the concept, Lijster sees it as a possible alternative to the 'grand narratives', the all-encompassing teleological metanarratives such as the Enlightenment or Marxism, whose death Jean-François Lyotard announced in 1979. These narratives mainly fell into discredit because of their often inflexible, totalitarian character, their tendency to push history and society top-down into a uniform mould, and to ignore or worse still to deny everything and everyone that did not fit in the picture.

According to Lijster and Boomkens, our age, with its tight network of mobility and communication systems, with its pervasive, globalized problems, once again needs more pretentious thinking and imagination on a larger scale. Perhaps the strong narrative does offer some consolation. It is a narrative that 'manages to lend its subject, with the help of certain rhetorical means, extra persuasiveness' and presents itself 'more explicitly than the grand narrative as a narrative', 'as a construction that, in an artificial and even affected manner, provides unity to an as yet impenetrable and incoherent collection of fragments'.⁴ This description again brings to mind the documentaries of Adam Curtis. He habitually introduces his elegant cut-and-paste work with the same deceptively simple formula, 'This is a story about ...'. According to Boomkens, strong narratives have an essayistic slant: 'While the grand narrative tried to grasp the totality in the form of the system (...), the searching and fragmentary form of the essay is suited to the strong narrative'.⁵

The documentary performances of Jaha Koo and of Huysmans and Dereere search from the bottom up for insight and clarity, and they invite us to search with them. They do not let the puzzle pieces they assembled come together seamlessly. These scenic essays do manage to make broader social connections emerge out of these individual parts, out of their combinations into layered, readable figures.

Beyond the thought experiment

In a review for *Theaterkrant*, Evelyne Coussens praised the dramaturgic and

4 Lijster, T. (2016). *De grote vlucht inwaarts: Essays over cultuur in een onoverzichtelijke wereld* (p. 201). Amsterdam/Antwerp: De Bezige Bij. Quote translated by Patrick Lijster. 202.

6 Coussens, E. 'Interessante denkoefening rond Braziliaanse mijnramp.' www.theaterkrant.nl (11 November 2016). Quote translated by Patrick Lennon.

philosophical profundity of *Mining Stories*. At the same time, she confessed that she missed something important. The show felt too much like 'an interesting thought experiment rather than impassioned theatre'.⁶ Although we ourselves would not suspect *Mining Stories* of a 'fear of emotion', on the contrary, Coussens's critical observations do raise the question of the theatrical translation of the essayistic.

How do you transpose a non-dramatic prose genre in an inspired manner to the stage? Although philosopher and art theorist Theodor W. Adorno did not consider the essay to be an art form – he believed that it leaned too heavily on the scientific for that – in his eyes it did have an 'aesthetic autonomy'. Great formal freedom flowed from this autonomy, the possibility of emancipating oneself from conventions and of creating reproductions 'conjured up by the topic'.⁷

It seems that that freedom does not always manifest itself in the theatre, where the rather static lecture-performance remains the most important formal reference for the scenic essay. Its basic ingredients are well known: a solo performer (generally the maker him/herself) sits or stands at a specific place on stage; he or she addresses the public directly; the scenography of the performance is rather austere, the lighting minimal; behind the performer, a video is screened (the contemporary miniature version of an *infini*, a traditional backdrop on which a panorama has been painted). Too often, the scenic essay remains stuck in modest variations on some of these elements.

The work of Michiel Vandevelde opens up possibilities towards a more dynamic scenic representation, despite its at first sight rather dry and cerebral character. In each of his productions, the choreographer focuses on urgent, often explicitly formulated political-theoretical issues. At the beginning of the solo *Antithesis, the Future of the Image* (2015), he frankly tells his audience what, in his view, is at stake: 'What is an image? What are "technical images"? Can images speak? Could we consider them as language? What is the future of the technical image? And in relation to this, what is the future of text?' For a show of about an hour, these questions are quite ambitious and pretentious – although the latter does not have to be a pejorative term (see above under Lijster/Boomkens).

Questioned about the complementarity of his activities as a philosopher, on the one hand, and as a novelist, on the other hand, Tristan Garcia recently let slip that writing fiction was like ambling down a country lane and calmly taking in the specific, concrete components of an imagined environment; practising philosophy was more like racing impatiently down a motorway from one abstract concept to the next.⁸ As an essayist, Vandevelde mainly ignores the first two poles of Huxley's triangle. He chooses straight-out for the motorway of abstraction.



The self-written essay, rendered in full in *Antithesis* and which we can later reread alongside a couple of other contributions in an overgrown, self-published programme booklet, is reminiscent of Hito Steyerl's inflated theoretical prose. The visual artist is the protagonist of a current movement that is trying to dissolve the boundaries between an artistic and a hard-boiled political-theoretical practice with hybrid publications, performances and installations.⁹ In Vandevelde's text, the essayist manifests himself as a compulsive reader, who cheerfully strings together quotes from the work of Henry

7 Adorno, T (2015). Het essay als vorm. In J. Hartle & T. Lijster (eds.), *De kunst van kritiek. Adorno in context* (pp. 98-99). The Hague: Octavo. Quote translated by Patrick Lennon.

8 A public conversation via Skype in the context of the Spring Meeting 2018 in the Performing Arts Forum.

9 For a discussion of part of this movement, see: Bauwens, L. (2017). 'De theorieboek als protagonist: Speculatieve experimenten in de hedendaagse (podium)kunst.' *Etcetera* (no. 150), pp. 60-64.

David Thoreau, Vilém Flusser, Neil Postman, Gavriel Salomon and Aldous Huxley. The process of searching takes precedence over the finding; the unfinished figure is not purely the product of a thought process, but seeks to provoke the public to think.

10 Lukács, op. cit., p. 26.

Antithesis, which recycles materials from Adam Curtis's blog essay *Happidrome* (2014), also draws on his mix of 'high' and 'low' cultural references. In Vandeveld's work, literature and theory cannot entrench themselves in the peaceful silence of the library. They are constantly surrounded and assailed by the noise of easy pop, video clips and commercials.

Essayists are *bricoleurs* rather than *inventeurs*. In the words of Georg Lukács, 'the essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive'.¹⁰ Vandeveld pushes that essayistic trait to its utmost by making use of the strategy of reappropriation. Inspired by the *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, or *Cannibal Manifesto* (1928) of the poet Oswald de Andrade, the choreographer appropriates existing materials, in particular those which dominate and 'colonize' our public space, such as advertising and mass culture. The hypothesis is that, by, as it were, 'consuming' and 'excreting' them in another form, it is possible to arrive at a new relation with them.

Although the elements of his essayistic figures are deliberately unoriginal, Vandeveld's staging of them is truly inventive. His fundamental media critique produces an unruly treatment of the multimedia source material, which generates possibilities to emancipate the scenic essay from its formal conventions and stasis. For instance, the text of *Antithesis* is not screened one line at a time as with traditional surtitles, but in full pages, like a book that the audience reads together. The 'cannibalized' popular music video clips free themselves from the two-dimensional screen. By reproducing the dances completely naked, the choreographer charges them with a physical vulnerability that they lack as 'technical images'.

“Michiel Vandeveldes fundamental media critique produces an unruly treatment of the multimedia source material, which generates possibilities to emancipate the scenic essay from its formal conventions and stasis.”

His next performance, *Our Times* (2016), which questions the status of thought in times of mass communication, goes even a bit further in the attempt to realize Adorno's ideal of a 'representation conjured up by the topic'. In a decor that radiates randomness and boredom, three dancers execute empty-funny actions like the ones you can see on countless daft homemade YouTube videos. The inherent polyphony of the essay text receives a lively scenic translation because the performance distributes different philosophical quotes across the three performers, as a result of which a strange sort of group conversation emerges. The placing of the audience around the event generates, no, compels even a dynamic performance. Although *Our Times* as a show rattles considerably, it shows a lot of experimental passion and courage.

The theatre as page

In *INFINI 1-15* (2016), Jozef Wouters mobilizes the entire theatre, from the back entrance through which set elements are hoisted in via the stage machinery and the stage up to and including the auditorium. The theatre space itself forms the most important subject of this grandiose project, which in its complete version was presented on the main stage of the KVS during Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2016. Wouters invited beforehand fourteen fellow artists to be part of the Decoratelier, a collective of set builders, thinkers and artists. He asked them to look with him at the question as to what places we should show in the theatre today.

The scenographer is known for wanting to emancipate his artistic discipline, just like his admired eighteenth-century predecessor, Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni, who with his *spectacles de machines* created shows in which the main role was reserved for the decor. The only guideline that the participants received was that their answers had to take the shape of a decor element with a long record of service: the *infini*. During the Renaissance, ancient Rome often featured on such backdrops as the ideal city. Wouters wondered whether we could blow new life into this tradition today. And if so, how?

During the making process, the participating artists were given the role of

11 Peeters, J. (2016). 'Negotiating and Hesitating in Space: Dramaturge Jeroen Peeters in conversation with the stage designer Jozef Wouters on the INFINI project.' Trans. Gregory Ball. <http://sarma.be/docs/3227>

correspondents, who sent Wouters and his team messages from different places around the world. Thomas Bellinck visited the headquarters of the European Border Agency Frontex in Poland; Rimah Jabr wrote a letter from Palestine; Arkadi Zaides turned his attention to the coast of the Greek town of Mantamados, where in 2015 more than a thousand migrants arrived daily. From these exchanges there emerged the plans for the *infinis*. In a conversation with dramaturge Jeroen Peeters, Wouters describes the architecture of the collaboration and the complex distribution of authorship that characterize *INFINI*: 'In this process we are constantly passing on questions to each other. I receive a question from the KVS, which I pass on to eight people [a group that grew in the second version of the project, ed.] who in their turn ask a question which I then have to consider again with the builders in the [Decoratelier], which raises new questions, and so on.'¹¹

(Aug. 2015).

Slowly but surely there thus emerged a collection of essays created collectively – a term that Wouters uses himself besides to describe the work. The 'essaying' that is comprised in the word 'essay' goes one step further in *INFINI* than the tentative puzzling together of that which exists; it takes on a more speculative character. A number of *infinis* are after all explicit suggestions to rethink the contemporary theatre space. Chris Keulemans, for instance, wonders how a city theatre can represent the super diverse city of the present day.. Today there are indeed countless ideas about what the ideal city could be. According to Michiel Vandevelde, the theatre should increasingly become a 'negative space', with thick walls that keep the outside world at bay. As a result his *infini* does not offer any perspective onto another place: most of the time we sit in a completely darkened theatre.

12 *Ibid.*, p.20.

The various contributions are introduced and presented by Wouters, who has the habit of standing beside his work to talk about it. Just as earlier installations were combined with a lecture-performance, the scenographer brings together during *INFINI* personal observations, stories drawn from the work process and quotes taken from sources of inspiration. This time he is supported by dramaturge Jeroen Peeters, who accompanies Wouters's essayistic speech with a visual essay filmed live, built up out of photo clippings. *INFINI* nevertheless goes far beyond the conventions of the lecture-performance. Stimulated by its own topic, the scenic essay lets the entire theatre participate in the performance: the public enters through the back door and can change places and therefore viewing perspective during the succession of the short chapters; *infinis* hang from all the metal battens in the KVS; the normally invisible machinery and technicians are part of the entire happening, etc. Wouters believes that scenography is perhaps 'the doubting architecture par excellence'. 'By considering *INFINI* as an essay, it is perfectly possible that the things that we show are still in doubt.'¹²

Almost twenty years after Hans-Thies Lehmann published *Postdramatisches Theater*, the scenic essay seems to be alive and kicking on our stages. Through the genre, the theatre expresses itself as an important place for reflection, for pretentious and ambitious reflection which, however, does not pretend to possess the Truth, the Norm and *the* idea about Art. As spectators we can *essay* with them, think with them, but without getting the guarantee of being able to leave the theatre with a definitive answer. What, in the better cases, we can take with us as we leave the theatre is a particular way of looking, thinking and collecting, a way of connecting together Marianne Van Kerkhoven's 'major' and 'minor dramaturgy', that of the performance, of the theatre as a medium and of our own lives.

Translated by Patrick Lennon.